

Writing Poetry from the Fringes of Globalization

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Abstract

Globalization has not only affected trade and politics of countries around the globe. It has also affected even the writing of poetry, more particularly the poet who aims to improve his craft. This paper examines the position of the Third World poet in relation to world poetry and the issues he confronts as he wrestles with his craft to produce new poetry. Being in a Third World country assumes that the poet is in a disadvantageous position, primarily because he is not in the center of political, economic, and cultural power. For this reason, he is assumed to have limited poetic resources that would guide him in developing his craft. This, however, is not so at present since the Internet can keep him abreast with the latest developments in world poetry. With the abundance of knowledge and information on poetry available in the web, the poet faces a set of issues in writing his craft.

Keywords: globalization, culture, Third World writer, poetry, internet

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Without the new media technologies, globalization would have taken a long time for countries to adopt liberal economic policies, and become globalized. Today, countries have become part of the global market place where culture and information that were once unavailable become accessible, and where their digitization makes transmission transcend time and space. Together with these developments, open markets have grown in number. Countries which did not trade before have become trading partners.

There has been the free flow of ideas from one country to another, at times threatening the political sovereignty of the latter. This is the very reason why the enemies of the Arab Spring, powerful men of Arab nations, attempt to seal off virtually their restive countries from the prying eyes of the world to prevent outside political interference. This political occurrence have divided people around the globe into taking sides, and have in some way created political loyalties. Meanwhile, people have realized that they can transmit love and their bodies online.

Within this purview, what can all this knowledge bring to a poet from a Third World country? How should he deal with it? This paper situates the contemporary Philippine poet in the context of global poetry. It looks into his attempt to improve his craft and the dilemmas he needs to confront. The data here have been gleaned from the experiences of this writer as a poet and craftsman interested in language and cognition, and other information related to the concerns of this paper.

Third World Poetry As Culture

Poetry is not only a literary genre but also a culture. As culture, it is essentially knowledge about the world, perspectives of reality, and insights into events and the human condition. It is likewise information that shapes and reshapes the thinking and ideological predispositions of its practitioners, critics, and audiences. Its continuous sustenance emanates from them, who form a loose community of interest that harks back to the advent of print. Although its members are dispersed, it is interest in the development of this aesthetic form that binds them.

The history of Third World poetry is embedded in the history of a country's colonization and economic development. In early societies, it grew out of an ethnic community that nurtured its own epic chanters and

listeners, and was transmitted orally using the mother tongue. Its aesthetics conformed to popular expectations of orality and social use of ritual and memory as evidenced by the existence of the epics and folk poetry. When the white men came to colonize what is now known as the developing world, he introduced his poetry to the colonized peoples who eventually blended or adapted the new poetic forms in their folk poetry. What resulted was a poetry that employed borrowed poetic forms and blended the languages of the white man's and the colonized.

With the arrival of printing, circulation of poetry was confined only to a privileged class. This happened because the introduction of the colonizers' language, writing system and literature compelled the colonized to learn them. In the process, as education was made a public right and gained wider acceptance, the colonized started to speak and write in the colonizers' language, and the more literate among them wrote poetry in the latter's language. In this regard, poetry no longer belonged to the community. Even if it spoke about experiences occurring in the community, it alienated people because its language and construction were appreciated only by a small schooled audience since the larger portion of the populace remained unlettered.

As the culture and language of the colonizer became part of the education of the colonized, the latter gradually learned to spurn their own mother tongue and culture. The colonizer, the white man, co-opted their thinking and ideology even after political independence. Recognition of a writer started at the local level but his canonization took place at the center, the colonizer's world (Patke 2006).

The poets adopted the free verse of the white man for it freed them from the exacting demands of regular meter and rhythm of local poetry. Since the lines of the poetic form suited the medium of print, free verse turned into a visually appealing form on the printed page even as it tried to imitate actual speech. The poets later attempted to claim the colonizer's language as their own literary medium, and tried to create distinct voices of their own. Breath, thought and context became their determinants of lineation and insight.

There were writers who succeeded in formulating their own unique voices. Yet a greater number of them, consciously or unconsciously, could not escape from the aural specter of the colonizer's language, which consisted of linguistic and cognitive structures of thought and tone. What resulted from this situation was that the poetry exuded a de-territorialized

sensibility. Poetry became an alien object in that more than its employment of the colonizer's language, it was using metaphorical and linguistic structures to which the colonized reader could not relate.

Dispersal of Global Poetry

Digitalization has made contemporary world poetry accessible in the Internet. The new poetry of Croatia, Iraq and Bolivia, for instance, can now be read online. Indeed, the Internet has provided the Third World poet many sites in the web that allow him to see works of other poets he had not known before. Although these works appear as translations in English, the experience of reading them gives him an idea how a poet from another culture and nation constructs his lines, images and metaphors.

While there exists a surfeit of American poetry in the Internet, those who read them, specifically observers from the Third World, can now compare their country's works beside the best poetry produced in US and other countries. One cannot assert anymore that America remains the center of the best poets in the world. It must now compete with other nations in terms of literary excellence. One thing is sure though: America has decentered itself from world poetry. Its new media technologies have unwittingly made its poetry so.

Yet America is probably the largest market of English poetry in the world, judging from its numerous little magazines, printing presses and literary journals. It favors its own poets and those chosen by its critics, providing token spaces for writers from other countries. Aside from these, poetry anthologies and works of individual poets writing in other languages have become available in English translation. Recently, there has been a wave of American print and online publications that have been put out to answer the need of certain global and secular audiences for poetry of marginalized nations in English.

Writing at the Globe's Fringes

The center of globalization is America, the world's highly political, cultural and economic power. In our particular part of the globe, it is the metropolis, Manila. One who writes poetry in the region is by assignation at the periphery of political and cultural power. Far from the center, he

feels isolated in his own community that pays more attention to mundane matters. If he writes in his own mother tongue, his task is even lonelier because there is no venue that would publish his works. At the level of writing, his writing a poem becomes an aggregate of problems from language use to an English-language-dominated cognition. If he writes in English, the use of the language itself becomes a stumbling block to writing since it requires a certain level of proficiency. His use of English is likewise compounded when he decides whether he should employ in his poem the tradition of Philippine English poetry, his local culture, and whether he should experiment with poetic procedures and cognitive structures gained from global poetry. This situation is something the poet should not rue. His peripheral location can also be a position of strength.

Whether he writes in one or two languages, the Philippine poet shuttles daily between two or three languages and modes of cognition - English, his mother tongue and the national language. Here each language embodies a memory ranging from the colonial to identity. Since the country is multilingual, his condition is such that he is either bilingual or multilingual. His writing of poetry in this light becomes a balancing act for he must make precise choices from language to cognitive configuration. Add to this the knowledge he absorbs from global poetry, and his poetry becomes the juncture of cultures and cognitive manipulation. Should he deal with the universals of experience? Or should he write about the cultural specifics of the local? Would local knowledge be accepted in the metropolis and the world? Should his use of English be similar to the brand prescribed by the poets and critics in the metropolis? Would borrowing, for instance, the linguistic structuring and cognitive configurations of poets from Eastern Europe, whose translated works reach him, enhance his poetry? How would he represent himself? How should he represent his nation? Would this tact help him create his own space in the metropolis and world poetry? Must his writing shake off the vestiges and residues of traditional poetic thought, colonial poetic memory, and their appurtenant cognitive structures? According to Patke (2006), even after the colonial empire has vanished, its departure has not stopped the construction of derivatives in the once colonized countries.

These questions are raised because the large inflow of information and knowledge in the Internet can make the poet self-conscious in terms of how he should approach his craft. By asking these questions, he is obviously seeking a kind of poetic autonomy and a unique poetic stance. A

recent anthology, which surveys new poetry in English, *Crown and Oranges*, edited by Bautista and Ishikawa, indicates how our young poets in English tend to write about the universals of experience. Though the poems are original, their attitudes and formulation appear to be subtle effects of a particular type of poetic thinking, predominant among poet teachers in the metropolis. "In Singapore After the 'I Love You' Bombings," Carl Javier depicts the nonchalance of people over news about bombings in far-off places like Lebanon and how such incidents are casually treated with ironic humor:

I was waiting for new reports
in the hotel room. CNN showed footage
of an assassinated Lebanese leader.
Earlier, in the airport, we got the news.
People turned on their phones
and received word of the three bombings
"That's three, like 'I Love You.' the girl I was with said.

Ime Aznar's "Father's Room" delineates the longing of a daughter for her father. The poem resonates the feelings of other poems that deal with the same subject, but it is Aznar's individuating and tangible images that pulls us:

I unlock the door each time I hear
the emptied space sighing for an occupant.
I touch your old radio with reverence,
my careful fingers probing grooves for clues
of your being. I examine your handwriting,
my thumbs stroking the letters,
feeling the depressions.

.....

There is nothing amiss about writing poetry that deal with the universals of experience. The fact of the matter is that Philippine contemporary poetry in English has tendentiously turned introspective, personal, and confessional, a condition which should not be so. While it is true that English to some extent has been naturalized (Abad 1999), it has also

wittingly or unwittingly naturalized certain cognitive configurations and attitudes - learned from the center, America, and transmitted through Philippine classrooms - which continue to circulate and to be reproduced among our younger generation of poets. That is why the continuous production and reproduction of such cognitive configurations like self deprecation and understatement have turned the poems into automatized gestures or conventions of reality. They make the poetry sound like derivatives, the reproduction of which has remained unabated. Similarly, poets writing in other major Philippine languages have not escaped from this literary effect.

The Desire for Poetic Freedom

Philippine poetry in English, as though by habit, has generally represented the nation as very liberal and very personal. It has made Philippine history look like a composite of personal histories, lives lived in an idiosyncratic way at a particular time of our national history. But this kind of poetic freedom, expressing personal histories though individuated, is not real freedom since the poet writes within the ambit of the white man's language, cognition and aesthetics. The specter of the white man's poetics communicated by the teachers in the metropolis is re-inscribed in the news poems of young writers.

The desire for poetic freedom has been attempted by our poets in the past. Often this desire is expressed in terms of refreshing local language metaphors, creating a novel linguistic arrangement of the lines, using English-language cognitive structures, and code switching. Except for code switching, these other poetic devices have spawned new poetry but the poems feels strange or foreign because the sensibility seems to alienate readers. A few poets have attempted code switching but with minor success. One such poet is Rolando Tinio who utilized code switching in one of his poems probably to test the acceptability of this poetic tactic. In "Valediction sa Hillcrest," the persona shifts between English and Tagalog, denoting one born to the upper class speaking a language which is highhandedly constructed and purposely awkward to evoke humor. From a sociolinguistic point of view, however, the code switching is odious because the language the poet employs is a forced linguistic amalgam that interferes rather than facilitate comprehension.

Recently, Merlie Alunan has attempted to write a poem in which English takes after the register spoken by the voice, an old woman from Balangiga, Samar. She is semi-literate and is of low social status: her English sentences are ungrammatical; she anglicizes the Waray term “kuto” into “cooties”; and her phonology is loaded with first language interferences. Alunan’s phonetic transcription of the English sounds to represent a semi-literate Waray speaking in English is arbitrary and not always faithful. It is obvious that she is creating a linguistic semblance. The effect of the entire register nonetheless is sardonic humor stemming from a situation, a woman haunted by her memory of the Balangiga rebellion – the killing of the Americans by the townspeople - an incident which she likens to her mother’s *massacre* of lice on her head.

Although the poem is supposedly a translation of Alunan’s poem in Cebuano, “Karmelitang Kotoon,” the translation in itself can stand as a separate poem in English. Below is an excerpt of the poem, “Carmelita, the Cootie Girl.”

“Nay, stop it, na, Nay,” I complain,
 “I tired na. Stiff na, my neck stiff. Sleepy na.”
 Nanay, she pull my hair ‘stead, she neber stop
 hunting for de cooties. “You shut up, gi’l,
 no fussing now. Umm! Umm! Ummm!
 Got it! Sus, dat was a fat one, no!”

De cooties, no way fo’ dem to escape
 from Nanay’s eyes. Hiding in the fores’
 of my uncomb’ hair, red-belly baby lice
 bloody full, the ole ones black
 like little carabaos—fo’ sure no escape fo’ dem,
 eyes too sharp. Her nails long, black
 with soot from de pot, very fas’.

She crush dem w’ her nails, here, der,
 pulling off the cootie eggs ‘til my scalp sting,
 tears come to my eyes. Oh, no pity when Nanay,
 hunting fo’ de lice. She say to me, “Ay, Carmelita,
 all dis cooties on your head, they tek you
 to de top top of bamboo pole, there they be free

to bite bite, chew chew until you all bones..."

Well, one day, my playmates call
fo' me to play downst'r—our house very poor,
de walls only of de coconut leaf. Dey all playing,
an' der I was, Nanay hunting de cooties ag'in
So I beg, "Nay, please, I want to play siyatom
wi' Boying an' Pidot." But Nanay, she not answer,
she stan' up quick quick, I fall, hit my head on de floor,
an' den Nanay shouting, "Apin, ginoo ko,
Apin! Apin!" Nanay ran, ran fas' down de ladder,
shouting, crying, "Apin, Apin."

I see my fader—his name Serapin—
dey tie his han's at de back wi' de rope,
togeder wi' de oder men, marching
marching by our house. Nanay running,
I running after her. Now she crying loud,
Rolling on de grass, shouting like I never heard befo',
"Apin, where dey teking you? Ooooy have pity,
don' tek away my husban'..."

The novel attempt of Merlie Alunan to make the language of a poem approximate the repertoire of a semi-literate persona or voice in the original language may succeed once or twice, but such linguistic tact can only do so much. There must be other ways of constructing poems where a poet can manifest poetic autonomy or freedom. This would probably require a reexamination of the linguistic and cognitive resources from his community, his knowledge from studying his compatriots' poetry, and the poetic resources made available by the digital media and global literary market.

Conclusion

Writing poetry in the Third World, particularly in a Philippines away from the nation's center of cultural power and the globe's center of politics and economics, may be writing at the fringes of globalization. This condition however is no longer a position of disadvantage. Beyond the English poetry long taught in the classroom and the newly published works of poets and anthologies of world poetry circulated in the global

market, the poet in English or a Philippine language has within his grasp the poetic resources and knowledge of the world available to him through the Internet. It is from this position that he can seek poetic freedom by learning from the web how the poets in other parts of the globe are constructing themselves, their nations and their metaphors of the world and by positioning himself in the context of global poetry.

Poetic freedom can only be realized when the Third World poet gets to settle the many questions about his craft in relation to local poetics, colonial memory, local and national realities, and globalizing culture. By confronting these issues, he may yet write poetry that is excellent and startling in its linguistic and cognitive configuration. Somehow the possibility for poetry written at the global fringes becoming mainstream may yet happen despite the dominance of global centers of political and cultural power. This notion is in no time realizable than now.

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